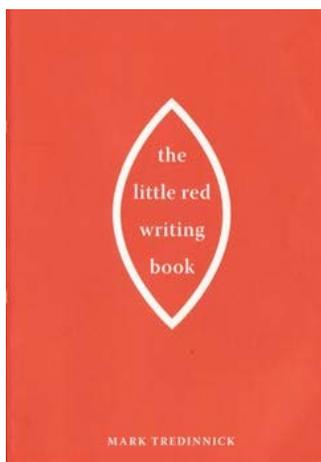


***TEXT* Review**

Tredinnick's Little Red Book

review by Scott Downman



Mark Tredinnick
The Little Red Writing Book
UNSW Press, Sydney, 2006
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262 pp. Pb. AUD29.95

It seems logical that a book about writing should be well written. But this is often not the case. Authors, in their efforts to coach would-be writers in the ABC of fluency, tend to pitch their books to a certain ideal, to a certain philosophy or to a certain pedagogy. Although Tredinnick does do this to some extent, his volume takes a turn that is a major breakthrough for books of this type: he pitches it to a broad audience who simply desire to write better. The approach is best summed up in the first chapter when he says: 'Let's not teach our students to be writers, let's just teach them how to write' (22). The learner-centred approach he uses is not rocket science, but the result is a personable investigation into the basics of language that serves to place an emphasis on both the value and power of words. Tredinnick does not 'lord it over' the reader, but seeks to simplify the writing process in a bid to remove writer's anxiety, which he acknowledges can cripple creativity. To achieve his aim, the author breaks writing into its most basic forms: words and sentences. He encourages the writer to value them one at a time, rather than being distracted by the overall goal, whether it be writing a job application, tender or book.

The volume, which would serve as an excellent introductory text, does not brim with grammatical jargon or linguistic terminology, although it is obvious the fundamentals of grammar are important to the author. He laments the removal of grammar instruction from Australian schools, and highlights the consequences of that decision: 'In the absence of real knowledge about grammar, we hold fast to the few

half-truths we seem to recall from somewhere' (58). The author recognises that power writing is not the product of creativity alone. Power writing is the product of the balance that comes from creativity and the discipline of using appropriate grammar.

There is no substitute for experience, and as you read through the book's countless writing tips, many carefully disguised as colourful metaphors, you realise the author has given the reader access to his own private, writing world. The volume is not just the product of Tredinnick's career as a professional author; it is the product of his lifelong learning. 'It is the upwelling of what I've learned over twenty years as a book editor, as a writer of essays and books and poems, as a teacher of creative and professional writing, as an instructor in composition and grammar, as a reader, and as a scholar and as a critic' (12). This nakedness creates a connection and warmth that makes *The Little Red Writing Book* more than a writing grammar guide and more than a writing manual - it highlights that writing is alive. And better still, it spurs the reader on to the conclusion that we are all capable of improving our writing efforts.

Tredinnick's motivation for writing the volume is made clear from the start. He is a passionate writer, with a love of language and a grave concern about the future of the written word. He says:

I'm not the first person to notice that we have entered deeply into an era of bad language. I fear we will live with the consequences of this bad language for a long time if we don't do something about it now. Democracy - not just art - depends on the lucid expression of careful and independent thinking. (12)

He cites similar criticism and fear from the likes of George Orwell. Somewhat controversially, he argues that bad language has today become the norm and that most people are immune to good writing. 'After a while we stop noticing how ugly and inexact, how pompous and flabby it has all become. By then we're writing that way ourselves' (48). Although this conclusion could be seen as a generalised broadside, it is a criticism that is borne out of the author's frustration. It is not directed purely at those who consider themselves professional writers but Tredinnick's criticism is directed at journalists, at politicians and at those in the workplace who communicate with the written word. It is directed at the community-at-large and, frankly, it needs to be said. As a teacher of the next generation of journalists, I share the author's concern and admire his courage in acknowledging and addressing these concerns. For Tredinnick, writing is an issue of heart and he has implanted his heart into this work. He does not pretend to offer a panacea, but does not ignore what he sees as the fundamental issues necessary to improve the quality of writing. This style makes what could be dry and intimidating, refreshingly digestible.

There are aspects of this volume that are sobering. It will not surprise if some find the arguments about grammar and bad language distasteful because the challenges presented in the book are confronting. The author's style forces you to review and reconsider your own writing style. Several times while reading the volume I found myself nervously reading on to see if I was guilty of some of the writing pitfalls the author highlights, particularly in the sections critical of newspaper journalism. I was forced to ask: 'Am I perpetuating bad language through my writing?' However, Tredinnick does not put the reader on a guilt trip, nor does he make the reader feel inadequate. His style is to reassure, correct and refine. He does not pretend writing is

easy but recognises how easy it is to take good writing for granted. To get the most out of this volume the reader must take a position of humility and open-mindedness.

Whereas in the past volumes of this type tended to use complexity to explain the so-called simplicity of language theory, Tredinnick chooses to use real-life examples and provides exercises throughout the volume so the reader can apply the principles he has illuminated. Under the heading 'Try this' there are more than 80 exercises in the book aimed at improving writing practice. The only criticism is that some of these exercises lend themselves to specific answers and there are no answers within the volume. Perhaps an accompanying website with answers would maximise the worth of these tasks. The other valuable strategy the author uses is breakout boxes on key subject areas such as: 'Ten ways of saying the same thing well', 'Twenty-four troublesome words and phrases', 'A litter of verbs' and 'A box of clichés'. These highlighted boxes emphasise key aspects of his argument, break up the text and act as an easy-to-find resource for the reader.

Reading Tredinnick's volume was for me like discovering El Dorado after a five-year quest to find a suitable book about writing for my journalism students. Although *The Little Red Writing Book* is not targeted specifically towards the journalism genre, it contains an original approach to writing that makes it achievable for all - and that is its brilliance. The format of the volume also contributes to its readability. Each of the eight chapters features sub-headings that successfully guide the reader through the pages. Each section is precise and the paragraphs are kept small, which cleverly holds the reader's attention. Although the linkage between some of these sections could be improved, Tredinnick has succeeded in giving the reader an experience, which ultimately serves to improve the writing craft. When I was first given *The Little Red Writing Book* to review I put it on my desk and stared at its cover for two months. Having read scores of books of a similar ilk, I was reluctant to read another. But after reading the introductory chapter, it became obvious that this was a fresh take on an age-old subject. Tredinnick in the opening chapter urges the reader to not just tell a story but to make their writing sing: 'In song, it's how you sing, not just what you utter, that counts. And so it is with writing' (26). *The Little Red Writing Book* offers a commonsense approach that, if heeded, ensures our written efforts will hit the right notes with those who read them.

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Return to Contents Page
Return to Home Page

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